

Return to a Just God

Printed Text · Malachi 3:1-10

Aim for Change

By the end of this lesson, we will: ANALYZE Malachi's prophecy about possessions, wealth, and hospitality in light of our faithfulness and justice; CONFESS personal unfaithfulness to God and INSTITUTE a personal charitable living plan.

In Focus

Robert couldn't believe what he was hearing from the pulpit. The pastor was talking about how the church was raising money to buy backpacks of school supplies for the poor kids in the community. All he heard was another call for money. It seemed like that's all preachers wanted. He had joined this church because his former church had turned giving into a competition and a get-rich-quick scheme. Now I'm giving my tithe faithfully... well, sort of. So, I'm giving 7 percent instead of 10 percent. I mean, I can't quite give 10 percent because I have so much that I need to take care of. Why should I give to these poor kids whose parents probably didn't care about their education anyway? Next thing you know, they will ask us to pay for people's rent and groceries. There are government programs to help kids like this. Besides that's where all of my taxes go. Why does God have to tax me because of other people's irresponsibility? It seemed to Robert as if God just wanted to rob him of his finances. He worked hard for his money. Did he have to give all of it to the church?

Our commitment to justice is shown in how we give to the Lord and His work. In this week's lesson, we will learn how faithfulness to a just God can be shown in our giving.

Keep In Mind

"Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them. Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts. But ye said, Wherein shall we return?" (Malachi 3:7, KJV).

Words You Should Know

- A. **Purge** (Malachi 3:3) zakak (Heb.) – Purify, distill, strain, refine.
- B. **Ordinance** (v. 7) khok (Heb.) – Civil enactment prescribed by God, a prescribed limit.

Say It Correctly

Sorcerer. SOR-she-rer

Ordinance. OR-di-nens

KJV

Malachi 3:1 Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts.

2 But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth? for he is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap:

3 And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness.

4 Then shall the offering of Judah and Jerusalem be pleasant unto the Lord, as in the days of old, and as in former years.

5 And I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not me, saith the Lord of hosts.

6 For I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.

7 Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them. Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the Lord of hosts. But ye said, Wherein shall we return?

8 Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings.

9 Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation.

10 Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it.

NLT

Malachi 3:1 “Look! I am sending my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. Then the Lord you are seeking will suddenly come to his Temple. The messenger of the covenant, whom you look for so eagerly, is surely coming,” says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies.

2 “But who will be able to endure it when he comes? Who will be able to stand and face him when he appears? For he will be like a blazing fire that refines metal, or like a strong soap that bleaches clothes.

3 He will sit like a refiner of silver, burning away the dross. He will purify the Levites, refining them like gold and silver, so that they may once again offer acceptable sacrifices to the Lord.

4 Then once more the Lord will accept the offerings brought to him by the people of Judah and Jerusalem, as he did in the past.

5 “At that time I will put you on trial. I am eager to witness against all sorcerers and adulterers and liars. I will speak against those who cheat employees of their wages, who oppress widows and orphans, or who deprive the foreigners living among you of justice, for these people do not fear me,” says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies.

6 “I am the Lord, and I do not change. That is why you descendants of Jacob are not already destroyed.

7 Ever since the days of your ancestors, you have scorned my decrees and failed to obey them. Now return to me, and I will return to you,” says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies. “But you ask, ‘How can we return when we have never gone away?’

8 “Should people cheat God? Yet you have cheated me! “But you ask, ‘What do you mean? When did we ever cheat you?’ “You have cheated me of the tithes and offerings due to me.

9 You are under a curse, for your whole nation has been cheating me.

10 Bring all the tithes into the storehouse so there will be enough food in my Temple. If you do,” says the Lord of Heaven’s Armies, “I will open the windows of heaven for you. I will pour out a blessing so great you won’t have enough room to take it in! Try it! Put me to the test!

The People, Places, and Times

Refiner. In order to separate the dross or impurities from the pure metal, a refiner would heat it until the dross burned off and the metal was purified or refined. Most mentions of refining in the Bible are for silver (Proverbs 25:4; Zechariah 13:9; Isaiah 48:10). Smelting lead sulfide ore and then blowing hot air over the surface of the melted metal usually did this. The refiner’s tools were a crucible or furnace and some bellows or a blow pipe. He would usually sit and carefully watch for the right time to let the melted metal run off (Malachi 3:3).

Fuller. A fuller was someone who cleaned clothes. It literally means “to trample.” This referred to how fullers laundered clothes by beating or stepping on them. There were many cleaning agents in biblical times, including white clay, urine, and alkali powder from indigenous plants. Malachi 3:2 refers to alkali powder. The fuller would take soda powder from the iceplant, found in Mesopotamia, and wash clothes. Afterward he would stomp on them or beat them with sticks. This process would not only clean the clothes, but also make them dazzling white (Mark 9:3).

Hireling. A hireling was a hired servant. This servant was different than a slave in that he was paid wages. A hireling was similar to a day laborer in that he would be hired out for different jobs at an hourly rate. Often the hired servant was a stranger or foreigner living in Israel or someone who was poor and in debt. Because a hireling had no land rights of their own, they were vulnerable to exploitation, so the Lord provided protection in the Law of Moses for them (Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:14).

Tithes and Offerings. A tithe was a tenth of someone’s possessions that was offered to God. Tithing was practiced in patriarchal times and existed before the Law was given on Mount Sinai. Once the Law was established in Israel, tithes were required annually and every third year. These offerings would help provide for the Levites, poor, fatherless, widows, and foreigners in the land. Offerings were the obligatory sacrifices to God that were taken from the flock or herd. The people of Israel were often complacent concerning both of these institutions during the time of Malachi.

Background

Malachi was written during the postexilic period. This was the time after the Jews returned from exile in Babylonia to rebuild their nation and the Temple of God. Malachi was a contemporary of Zechariah and Haggai. All three prophets were concerned with the people’s neglect and complacency concerning the worship of God, and the people’s repetition of the sins and injustice that caused them to be scattered in the first place. Malachi spoke out against a corrupt priesthood. He also indicted the people of Judah for their lack of faith, which was shown in the neglect of worship, particularly in withholding tithes and sacrificial offerings. This meant that the priests who officiated worship were not adequately provided for. It also meant that worship was not continuous and therefore not a priority among the majority of the people. Malachi condemned this attitude and announced that God’s messenger would come to refine His people so that they worship Him in righteousness.

At-A-Glance

1. The Messenger of God (Malachi 3:1–4)
2. The Message of God (vv. 5–7)
3. The Maintenance of God’s House (vv. 8–10)

In Depth

1. The Messenger of God (Malachi 3:1–4)

Malachi begins this oracle with an announcement concerning God’s messenger, who will prepare the way before Him. It is a prophecy concerning the time of the Messiah. The people needed to change their ways in order to receive the Messiah, so a messenger would be sent to prepare them for His coming. Although they long for a Messiah who will bring justice, they are not in a moral state to be ready for Him. Malachi’s announcement lets them know that a Messiah is coming, and they need to be ready for Him when He comes.

This Messiah or “messenger of the covenant” will come to the temple and will refine and purify His people. Malachi shows them that their cries for justice are hypocritical (Malachi 2:17) because they themselves will not be able to stand the refining fire of this coming Messiah. He will purify the sons of Levi so that their offerings to God will be pleasant to Him. The Lord wants to purify them like silver and gold, or the whitening soap of a launderer. He desires pure worship from a righteous people.

2. The Message of God (vv. 5–7)

Malachi then takes the people into the heavenly law courts. The Lord is the chief witness testifying against them. He will not be hesitant but swift in His judgment of their unrighteousness. He has seen their adultery, oppression, sorcery, lying, and idolatry. They have no excuse for their behavior, and the Lord will see to it that they are judged accordingly. He then states, “For I am the LORD, I change not” (v. 6). He is not a wishy-washy God. His character is steadfast and faithful, therefore they “are not consumed” (v. 6).

Next, the Lord points out the irony of the situation. He has not changed, but they have changed by not being faithful to His ordinances. The laws and limits He has given them were part of the covenant He made with the nation. The Lord has not strayed from His covenant, but His people have. Their cries for justice are a moot point since they have been disloyal to God. He says if they return to Him, then He will return to them. The people of Judah want justice, but God wants them to repent. Now the question on the people’s lips is “Wherein shall we return?” (v. 7).

3. The Maintenance of God’s House (vv. 8–10)

Malachi points out that they are the ones in the wrong. He pronounces them as cursed by the Lord. Although they demanded justice, they have robbed God by not giving the tithes of their crops and herds and by not giving the proper worship sacrifices or offerings (Malachi 1:6–14). They give blind, diseased, and sometimes even stolen animals to the Temple. This is shameful and disrespectful in God’s eyes. They also have not given the tithe, which is designed to support the priests and others who have no land rights (Deuteronomy 14:28–29, 26:12).

Lastly, the Lord then issues them a challenge: He calls them to put Him to the test by giving their full tithe. By giving pure, whole animals from their flocks and herds and tithing the best of their crops, they would be placing their trust in the Lord. Their tithe would be placed in the storehouse for the priests, and God’s house would be properly maintained. The Lord says if they do this, then He would bless them beyond what they would ever need. Instead of being cursed, they would be blessed so much they would not have room for the abundance that He would give them. This is the reward for their returning to Him.

Search the Scriptures

1. What is the purpose and role of the “messenger of the covenant” (Malachi 3:1)?
2. How could the people properly return to the Lord (vv. 8–10)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. In what ways does the Lord refine and purify His people?
2. Since we do not live in an agricultural society, we do not have crops and flocks and herds of animals. How does God bless us in the twenty-first century when we give to Him?

Liberating Lesson

Many people today cry out hypocritically for justice. The same people who demand justice are quick to dish out injustice. We fight with others and look down on those who are disadvantaged. We cheat and steal from others in order to claw our way to success. Then we complain to God when someone cheats and steals from us. We are quick to point the finger and pray to God to make things right. We only pray when we need something and neglect God in our everyday life. The lesson for us today is that making things right has to start with us. We cannot think that God will take care of our house when we do not take care of His house.

Application For Activation

Oftentimes we want God to be there for us in our time of need, yet we don't ask how we can serve Him. This week in your prayer times, instead of asking the Lord for things that benefit you, ask Him how you can serve Him and be a blessing to those around you. If you are not being faithful in your financial giving to your local church, make a commitment to give. If you have been faithful, consider what charities or nonprofits could be blessed by your financial giving. Ask your pastor or church leader whether there is a missionary you can help support through your financial contribution.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Malachi 3:1–10

1 Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the LORD, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the LORD of hosts.

The name "Malachi" (Heb. mal'aki, malah-KEE) means "my messenger." However, scholars generally agree that the prophet who goes by that name is not being referred to here. Rather, Jewish scholars believe that the person being identified is Elijah the prophet (see Malachi 4:5), while Christian New Testament scholars believe that the person identified is John the Baptist (see Matthew 11:10), who heralded the coming of the Lord Jesus in the spirit and power of Elijah (see Matthew 11:14, 17:11–12; Luke 1:17). This messenger "shall prepare" (Heb. panah, pah-NAH, to remove, to clear a path) "the way" (Heb. derek, DEH-rehk, a road, distance, journey, or manner) for Him. Many scholars debate whether the individual identified as "my messenger" differs from the individual referred to as the messenger "of the covenant" (Heb. berit, beh-REET, promise or

agreements). Some believe that the person being spoken of as “the messenger of the covenant” is the Messiah. The message that Malachi the prophet was to deliver to the people seems to be in response to their question in Malachi 2:17 when they inquire, “Where is the God of judgment?” Malachi responds that the Lord they “seek” (Heb. bakash, bah-KASH, to seek, demand, or find) and in whom they find “delight” (Heb. khafets, khah-FEHTS, having pleasure in) will come “suddenly” (Heb. pit’om, pit-OME, any moment now or unexpectedly) to His temple. The question of those who are seeking to live and do right is rhetorical. The priests of the temple are corrupt and many of the people have stopped taking issues of right or wrong seriously. Malachi warns that the Sovereign Ruler will come unannounced and bring judgment with Him.

2 But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth? for he is like a refiner’s fire, and like fullers’ soap:

Because the Lord will bring judgment with Him, Malachi asks the people, who will be able to “abide” (Heb. kul, KOOL, to survive or endure) the day “of his coming” (Heb. bo’, BOE, to fall or light upon). Further, he inquires who will be able to “stand” (Heb. ‘amad, ah-MAHD, to stand up) when He “appeareth” (Heb. ra’ah, rah-AH, to present oneself or to be visible). The suggestion is that no one will be able to continue as before, because the Lord will come like a “refiner’s” (Heb. tsaraf, tsah-RAHF, to purge away or to smelt) fire or even like the “fullers” (Heb. kavas, kah-VAHS, to launder or wash by treading) “soap” (Heb. borit, bo-REET, lye or potash). It is noteworthy that Christ did not come initially to bring judgment, but God’s grace. Like many of the Old Testament prophets, Malachi did not distinguish between Christ’s first coming in grace and His second advent for judgment. These two occurrences of Christ were merged by the prophets into a single appearance, with the need to satisfy the demands of justice having prominence.

3 And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the LORD an offering in righteousness.

4 Then shall the offering of Judah and Jerusalem be pleasant unto the LORD, as in the days of old, and as in former years.

Such a “purge” (Heb. zakak, zah-KAHK, to distill or strain) will be harsh on all who are found to be lacking moral or ethical standards. The Lord’s purpose, once He appears, will be to “purify” (Heb. taher, tah-HAIR, to pronounce clean) His temple, and its leadership, the Levites. Malachi tells the people that the Lord will begin His work of purification with the priests. He will “sit” (Heb. yashav, yah-SHAHV, to dwell or remain) as one who refines silver, because it is more difficult than refining gold. The refining of silver requires hotter fires and takes more time and patience. Once the temple and its leadership have been cleansed, the expectation is that the priests will once again return to the offering of sacrifices as spelled out in the laws of the Old Testament, and the people will follow their leadership. The end result of all of these actions will be a restoration of the relationship between God and His chosen people (see Philippians 1:8–11).

5 And I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not me, saith the LORD of hosts.

6 For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.

Malachi continues to respond to the people’s question (2:17). He informs them that God will appear, and in addition to being a refining fire on some, will be the God of “judgment” (Heb. mishpat, meesh-PAHT, justice, legal decision before a judge) they asked for. The continual presence of so many within the community of returned exiles practicing acts condemned by the Law serves as an indication that they do not fear God, and His punishment will be their reward. When God does appear to judge, there will be no need for others to be witnesses against the wrongdoers; God has

declared that He Himself will be the witness. However, because God is unchanging and always remains true to His word, His people will not be “consumed” (Heb. kalah, kah-LAH, to come to an end) even in their faithlessness and rebellion.

7 Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them. Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts. But ye said, Wherein shall we return?

The rebellion in the Jewish nation had been going on for a very long time. Like their “fathers” (Heb. ’av, AHV, the head or founder of a household, group, family, or clan) before them, the people have turned away from the ordinances of God and embraced evil (see Matthew 15:3), which is resulting in the ruin of the nation. Malachi, speaking for God, implores them to return to the “ordinances” (Heb. khok, KHOKE, rules or commands) of the Law so that the Lord of hosts would reward them by returning to them. The people have shown themselves deserving of God’s wrath, and as the righteous judge, He has every right to consume them, but God demonstrates His patience and graciousness to His chosen people by speaking gently to them and offering for them to return. The people only need to repent. This was the message of John the Baptist, too (see Matthew 3:2, 4:17). However, rather than repentance, the Lord’s plea is met with continued denial and rebellion. The self-righteous Pharisees do not feel the need for repentance because they believe that they have kept the whole Law and are blameless before God. In asking “wherein shall we return” (Heb. shuv, SHOOV, to turn back) to God, they are justifying themselves and their behavior in their own eyes. The parallels between Malachi’s confrontation of the priests and other leaders and John’s confrontation of the Pharisees reminds us that in all times and places, people have a tendency to become complacent about worshiping God and doing justice.

8 Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings.

9 Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation.

Through the prophet, God answers their inquiry. The people are guilty of robbing (Heb. kaba’, kah-VAH, to defraud) God because they have stopped bringing their tithes and offerings for sacrifice to the temple. The nation is to take care of the needs of the priests and the Levites; however, by not giving their tithes and not offering sacrifices, or by doing either grudgingly, they are guilty of robbing God. The people’s lack of giving with a cheerful spirit is viewed by God as a lack of gratitude for how He favored them or lack of acknowledgement of Him as Lord. The “curse” (Heb. ’arar, ah-RAR, to condemn or call judgment down on) God inflicts on them is the withholding of rain so their crops will not grow (see 3:11).

10 Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it.

Finally, God challenges the people to put Him to the test. They are to once again bring their tithes to the “storehouse” (Heb. ’otsar, oh-TSAR, treasure-house or armory), a repository which was attached to the Temple and over which the priest exercised control, and “prove” (Heb. bakhan, bah-KHAN, to examine or try) if God would in fact open the windows of heaven so that an overabundance of “blessing” (Heb. berakah, beh-rah-KAH, gift, prosperity) might flow down. Malachi suggests that the people who did bring tithes to the storehouse were guilty of withholding a portion of those tithes, thereby robbing God further. He implores the populace to bring all their tithes so that they might receive God’s favor.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday

Psalm 25

Tuesday

Matthew 7:7-14

Wednesday

Malachi 3:11-18

Thursday

Joel 3:9-16

Friday

Jeremiah 6:26-30

Saturday

Isaiah 57:10-21

Sunday

Malachi 3:1-10